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ABSTRACT

The percentage of students who speak and write English as a Second Language (ESL) is steadily increasing on all college campuses. Although only 8% of the student body at the Pennsylvania State University are ESL students, 15% of the Penn State Writing Center clientele are ESL students. In the past, the Penn State peer tutor training program has only marginally addressed cross-cultural communication and has offered only general strategies for tutoring limited English proficient students. This research project explores the institutional history of serving ESL students at Penn State, surveys both tutors and ESL students, and develops materials for use in the Penn State Writing Center. The resulting materials include a unit for training new tutors and a series of staff development exercises for use with current tutors. In order to disseminate this information to a wider audience, a presentation of the research findings was given at the Ninth Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing on October 23, 1992, at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and an essay has been prepared for publication on the advancements made in the Penn State Writing Center to better serve the ESL population. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

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# Cross-cultural communication in the Writing Center and in the tutoring session: A process of sensitization

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**The percentage of students who speak and write English as a Second Language (ESL) is steadily increasing on all college campuses. Although only 8% of the student body at the Pennsylvania State University are ESL students, 15% of the Penn State Writing Center clientele are ESL students. In the past, the Penn State peer tutor training program has only marginally addressed cross-cultural communication and has offered only general strategies for tutoring limited English proficient students. This research project explores the institutional history of serving ESL students at Penn State, surveys both tutors and ESL students, and develops materials for use in the Penn State Writing Center. The resulting materials include a unit for training new tutors and a series of staff development exercises for use with current tutors. In order to disseminate this information to a wider audience, a presentation of the research findings was given at the Ninth Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing on October 23, 1992, at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and an essay has been prepared for publication on the advancements made in the Penn State Writing Center to better serve the ESL population.**

## Introduction to the Writing Center

The Penn State Writing Center consists of both professional and peer tutors. The professional tutors are graduate students who conduct semester-long, one-on-one tutorials with students who desire or are recommended for additional writing assistance outside of their basic English composition courses. Although this research focuses on the needs of the peer tutors, some of the educational exercises developed have been utilized in the training of professional tutors as well. Hereafter, *Writing Center* will be used to refer to peer tutors only.

The Penn State Writing Center offers free peer tutoring in writing to all Penn State students. The peer tutors are chosen from either a freshman honors composition course or a required junior-level writing course, so they represent a wide range of disciplines, from chemical engineering to English. The peer tutors complete a three-credit semester-long practicum/writing course (English 250) before coming to work for the Writing Center. They then participate in weekly staff meetings which provide ongoing training.

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Students bring to the Writing Center many types of writing, including compositions for English courses, written assignments for other subjects, application letters, and texts for speeches. Writers bring in their work at all stages of the composition process, from understanding the assignment and brainstorming for ideas to making revisions and polishing the final draft. Students meet with a tutor during afternoon walk-in hours at the main center or in the evening at one of seven locations around campus. Sessions usually last thirty minutes, and the student sets the agenda for the session. The peer tutor does not do any writing on the paper; instead, the tutor uses questions and suggestions to guide the student to critically examine the writing and to decide where and how it could be improved. Through conversation with the student, the peer tutor offers non-threatening, constructive feedback in the context of being a fellow writer. The peer tutor is also knowledgeable in areas of grammar, organization, and proofreading, and offers to share this information with the writer as needed. For example, the peer tutor will not proofread a paper for the student, but will explain how to proofread and will guide the student in correcting the paper.

While the peer tutor training course, English 250, focuses mainly on the argumentative writing form, writing strategies and techniques, and the study of peer review, it also briefly addresses salient issues of tutoring in such fields as English as a Second Language (ESL), Black Vernacular English, and sexist language. Working tutors continue their examination of these issues in much greater depth during ongoing staff development meetings.

## Writers for Whom English is a Second Language

ESL writers, like all writers who come to the Writing Center, represent a wide range of needs and abilities. Some need guidance only on polishing the final draft of their papers, while others have difficulty with syntax and word endings. While ESL writers are as intelligent as any other writer, they are limited in their expression of this intelligence by their unfamiliarity with standard American English. Native speakers of English are most concerned with content when they write; ESL students have to struggle with word choice and grammar, and content to produce the same results.

## Why Focus on ESL Tutoring Concerns?

The University Park campus of Penn State serves approximately 3,000 ESL students as part of 35,000 graduate and undergraduate students. Since the Writing Center

believes that all writers can and should benefit from its services, the Center expected approximately 8% of peer tutor contacts to be ESL writers. Instead, over 15% of contacts have been ESL writers. Since the Writing Center operates on a walk-in policy, and the peer tutors staff a total of seven locations around campus every school night, it is not practical to have one or two ESL-specialized tutors serve the needs of all ESL students. Each of the center's twenty-five tutors needs to be comfortable with , if not adept at, tutoring ESL writers.

Another reason why the Writing Center does not offer ESL-specialized tutors on its staff is related to the institutional organization of the Penn State campus. The Writing Center is supported by the English Department and the Academic Assistance Program, and its services are available to all students on a walk-in basis. The ESL Center, on the other hand, is supported by the Speech Communications Department, and it offers ESL-oriented English composition and speech communications courses for credit. There has previously been little institutional exchange of information between the Writing Center and the ESL Center. One function of this research is to bridge this gap by educating the entire peer tutoring staff to serve all ESL writers better.

In 1989, a survey was conducted among the Penn State peer tutors to gauge their feelings toward tutoring ESL writers. The survey results indicated that the tutors generally did not enjoy and did not look forward to tutoring ESL students, and that they were very frustrated by the demands that tutoring ESL students placed upon them. These surprising results then became the incentive to initiate this research project to better understand and meet the needs of ESL writers and the needs of peer tutors in relation to these students.

## The Process of Sensitization

The initial research, conducted by the author and other peer tutors[1], involved attending and participating in conferences on peer tutoring, including the Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, and talking with other writing centers. The researchers contacted both centers which have had experience with ESL writers as well as those which were just beginning to address ESL issues. The researchers also consulted with local experts in the field of English as a Second Language and conducted an exhaustive search of the available literature on ESL tutoring (full bibliography provided in Szpara, 1994). Once supporting information was gathered, the process of sensitizing the Writing Center staff to the issues surrounding the tutoring of ESL writers took three main forms: (a) recognizing, understanding, and practicing cross-cultural communication (1990-

present); (b) developing resources for both the tutor and the writer and developing specific strategies in tutoring ESL writers (1990-1992); and (c) after the implementation of (a) and (b), surveying peer tutors and ESL students, analyzing the findings, and offering further training as needed (1992-present). This process, from the initial survey to the follow-up survey, took approximately four years.

Recognizing, Understanding, and Practicing Cross-cultural Communication

The recognition, understanding, and practice of cross-cultural communication has involved developing the tutors' awareness in three areas: (a) awareness of their own attitudes and values and those of the writers, (b) awareness of different culturally-based writing styles, and (c) awareness of forms of non-verbal communication in different cultures. One example of a staff development exercise on cross-cultural communication involves a discussion centered around a list comparing five insights into cultural differences (Table 1).

**Table 1: Comparison of "American" Culture and Other Cultures**

(adapted from "Contrastive Patterns in Non-verbal Communication Among Different Cultures")

| The "American" Culture | Other Cultures |
|---|---|
| 1) Personal space ranges from 18" to 24" or more. | 1) In other cultures such as Puerto Rican, personal space is 0" to 18". |
| 2) Touching strangers is discouraged in this non-contact culture. | 2) In Puerto Rican and southern European cultures, touching is culturally accepted. |
| 3) People are informed of activities with at least a week's notice. | 3) In other cultures, notice of a few minutes may be sufficient time. |
| 4) Americans like to be logical and to the point in their communication. | 4) In the Japanese and Chinese cultures, it is better to talk around a point. In Vietnamese culture, certain topics (such as one's own feelings) are not discussed directly. |
| 5) American paragraphs are developed according to inductive or deductive patterns. | 5) In the Semitic languages, paragraphs are based on a series of parallel constructions. In Oriental writing, paragraphs are developed by working around the subject. |

Over the course of a half hour, the discussion facilitator encourages tutors to examine how, if at all, a particular cultural difference might affect a tutoring session. The tutors also examine whether their awareness or the writer's awareness of this cultural

difference would facilitate communication during the tutoring session. In the past, tutors have found this exercise to be useful in uncovering reasons for miscommunication and misunderstandings that they have experienced in their tutoring sessions. During any discussion involving generalizations about cultural groups, such as those listed in Table 1, the tutors should recognize the danger of stereotyping writers and should consider this information as an addition to their tutoring repertoire -- a means of expanding their cultural awareness, rather than limiting it.

Developing Tutor/Writer Resources and Specific Strategies for ESL Tutoring

Based on interviews with the peer tutors and Writing Center Coordinators, the need for a concise, accessible resource manual for tutors and writers was established. Specifically, tutors wanted written materials to aid in their explanation of common ESL writing problems. The "Tutoring Handbook for Use with the ESL Writer" was then developed, which includes information on using articles (*a, an, the*), applying word order rules, and proofreading for spelling, among other topics (Table 2). The handbook is bound only by a paper fastener, so tutors can carry a copy with them during their shift, give pages to a student as needed, and replenish the pages later.

The author developed additional resources for tutors working with ESL writers, including a bibliography of resource books, strategies for facilitating the professor-student-tutor relationship, and a collection of readings for new tutors. The readings were also made available to experienced tutors for their own ongoing professional development. The readings cover a wide range of topics from Robert Kaplan's (1984) "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education" to Ann Raimes' (1991) "Errors: Windows into the Mind." The author also developed a collection of exercises to foster cross-cultural communication skills. These exercises include the exploration of cultural "uniquenesses," exercises for learning about different cultural writing styles, a discussion of problems in tutoring ESL writers, and interactive skits to elicit and explore feelings toward ESL students and ESL tutoring. Several of the staff development exercises were selected for adaptation and implementation in the English 250 training course held every spring semester.

**Table 2: Table of Contents, "The Tutoring Handbook for Use with the ESL Writer"**

I. Tips for Tutoring ESL Writers
II. Common Grammar and Usage Trouble Spots for ESL Writers
- Articles--*A, An, The*
- Comma
- Two Comma Punctuation
- Semi-colons
- Punctuation (.,::_'"")
- Proofreading
- Spelling Rules
- Irregular Verbs
- Subject/Verb Agreement
- Run-ons
- "If" Statements
- Word Order

III. Writing the Introduction and Conclusion
- Sample Introductions
- Sample Conclusions

IV. Self-Evaluation Checksheet
V. Indexes to Writing Tutors' Files
- Index to the Writing Tutors' Exercise File
- Index to the Writing Tutors' General Information Files

Surveying Peer Tutors and ESL Students

After staff development exercises, discussions, and a review of ESL tutoring tips, tutors were asked to record their reactions to individual ESL tutoring sessions (see Appendix 1). Tutors' responses in this follow-up survey were much more positive than those in the initial survey four years earlier. However, they continued to express concern over problems common to ESL tutoring, such as how to explain correct article usage and how to develop the writer's proofreading ability.

In addition, ESL writers who utilize the Writing Center's services were asked to complete a survey designed to elicit (a) their needs with respect to English writing, (b) their evaluation of the Writing Center services, and (c) a self-assessment of their writing ability (see Appendix 2). Overall, the ESL writers indicated satisfaction with the services of the Writing Center tutors and a desire for expanded access to those services.

Both sets of surveys also suggested a number of areas in which additional study is necessary and in which more resources need to be developed. The author is currently exploring the particular needs of African ESL writers and hopes to create beneficial exercises to develop tutors' cultural sensitivity in this area.

## Conclusion

It is the author's hope that this collection of educational staff development programs and tutor/writer resources will offer a foundation upon which to build. Those interested in sharing information are encouraged to correspond with the author via electronic mail (MXS119@dolphin.upenn.edu) or at the following address: 250 Kathleen Drive, Peckville, Pennsylvania, 18452-1715. In this way, tutors who have begun to sensitize themselves to the needs of ESL writers will be able to continue this process as new information surfaces and better ways of serving ESL writers are discovered.

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[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the many contributions of the Penn State Peer Tutors in Writing, the Writing Center Coordinators, and the Writing Center Director, Dr. Ron Maxwell.

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## Appendix 1: Tutor's Form for ESL Tutoring Evaluation

Tutor's Name _____
Date _____
Time In/Out _____
Location of Tutoring Session _____

1) How, if at all, did your tutoring in this session differ from your work with writers who speak English as their native language?

*"I try to ask questions about the student's background...it helps me to show respect for their culture..."*
*"ESL writers seem to be "better" writers -- more in command of their thoughts..."*

2) Are there any resources (i.e.--additions to the ESL Handbook, further training, etc.) that would be helpful to you in ESL tutoring?

*"a book of American idioms"*
*"information on African culture, relational style, and writing style"*

3) Any other thoughts, comments, or questions?

*"Articles and tenses are general problems."*
*"Perhaps it always has to be this step-by-step process for people learning another language."*

**Note: A sampling of tutors' responses are given in italics.**

## Appendix 2: Writing Center - ESL Tutoring Evaluation

Please take a few minutes to answer these questions. Your comments will help us learn how to serve you better. Thank you!

1) Tutor's Name _____

2) Date _____
Time In/Out _____
Location of Tutoring Session _____

3) What is your native language? _____
Do you speak any other languages in addition to English and your native language? Which ones?

4) Have you used the Writing Center before? Yes No

5) What kind of help or feedback did you want to get from this tutoring session?

*"correcting grammar error"*
*"idioms, natural expressions, and pronunciation"*
*"sentence structure"*
*"to improve my paper"*

6) When the session was over, what else, if anything, did you wish the tutor had focused on?

7) What do you feel is the most difficult part of writing in English?

*most common answers: "grammar", "lack of vocabulary", and "short and clear or simple sentences"*

8) How would you rate your English writing ability? You can rate it on a scale of 1 (Low) to 5 (High), and/or make a comment.

1 2 3 4 5

9) What suggestions do you have for improving the Writing Center services for ESL writers?

*"ESL-specialized tutors"*
*"more time with tutors"*

Please feel free to make additional comments or continue any response on the back of this sheet or a separate piece of paper. Thank you for your help!

**Note: A sampling of tutors' responses for questions #5, 7, and 9 are given in italics.**